

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
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LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL

ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN

INFORMANTS: BARBARA AND ALBERT BERNSTEIN [JEWISH]
INTERVIEWERS: CRAIG THOMAS, YINGCHAN ZHANG, AND CHRISTOPH

STROBEL

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I = INTERVIEWERS

AB = ALBERT

BB = BARBARA

Tape 08.19

I: You said you were a native, what do you mean by that?

AB: I was born in Lowell.

I: What part of Lowell?

AB: ...I lived in the Highlands for about fifty years....I lived on Howard Street, but they tore it down; there's industry there now I believe. A lot of different people lived there, Polish people, Jewish people; it was a Jewish area around Howard Street, there were two synagogues.

I: Can you talk a little bit about the Howard Hale neighborhood, about what life was like?

AB: People of all religions lived there. Italian people, Polish people, Jewish people. There were a lot of three tenement houses and that was Hale-Howard. They tore down a part of Howard Street, but the other side still exists and Hale Street still exists and there's a different industry there now.

I: Was it mostly triple-deckers when you lived there?

AB: Yes, triple-deckers. I lived in a triple-decker on the third floor and usually they didn't have central heating; you had a stove.

I: I understand the Hale-Howard area had kosher markets and a Hebrew school.

AB: Yes, there were kosher markets, small grocery stores. There were two synagogues.... But it didn't really matter. Jewish people went to either one. You could go wherever you wanted.

I: Were most of the Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe?

AB: Most likely, yes. Poland and Russia.

I: Do you have any memories of that Barbara?

BB: The neighborhood was just in the process of being demolished before we got married. Albert's father died six or seven weeks before we got married and his funeral was in one of these synagogues and it was pretty well gone at the time, but the people weren't living in the neighborhood actually at that point, were they?

AB: They were still living there; most of the houses were in bad shape.

I: So most of the people had moved out before they tore things down, there wasn't a huge displacement, or as large as it could have been?

AB: Gradually they moved out. Poor people moved in and eventually they moved out too.

I: Do you have any sense of where they moved to, especially the Jewish community?

AB: Some of them moved up to the upper Highlands and to Chelmsford. They moved up into better houses.

I: I understand there used to be a pretty big Jewish neighborhood in the upper Highlands as well as on Hale-Howard. Was that your experience of the city?

BB: I think it was mixed like it is now. Our neighbors were Polish, and Syrian...

I: I think there were three synagogues up here.

BB: Two. Well, there's one off Stevens Street on West Forest Street. But ninety percent of the members live in Andover. They come to the temple in Lowell; we never figured that out.

I: There used to be the one on Princeton.

BB: That was the one we belonged to, but because the Jewish community was dwindling, we sold the building to Community Christian Fellowship and the congregation merged with the temple in Andover. So we're going from Lowell to Andover and people from there are coming to Lowell. But that's a Reform temple; ours is Conservative and the one on Westford Street is Orthodox.

I: Is the Orthodox one still functioning?

BB: It's hanging on by a thread. They have Saturday morning services, but even then I don't know. You need ten people to have an official service going on and I question whether they even have ten people on Saturday morning. It's pretty much one or two families that keep it going. I think the future of that synagogue is a little bit in doubt too, which is a shame, but neighborhoods change.

I: The Hebrew school attached to that doesn't function anymore does it?

BB: That closed, the day school, which went from kindergarten to sixth grade; and that was thriving for years, but that's been closed for quite a few years now.

I: So where do most people go, just all over the place?

BB: Chelmsford, Westford; a lot of the people that used to belong to the Orthodox one I think have moved to the Boston area, at least that's the feeling I get.

I: You said you were born in the Boston area, so you did the opposite.

BB: Yeah, he came and got me.

I: Was it always an English speaking community in Lowell or was there a Yiddish speaking community?

AB: Well, a lot of the older people might have spoken Yiddish, but the younger people used mostly English.

I: Was language important to the Jewish community in Lowell, part of the Jewish identity?

AB: No, they assimilated pretty well.

BB: Jewish identity was important, but not so much the Yiddish language. There's a lady I still keep in touch with, she lives in Florida, and she had a Yiddish group going, not so much teaching it, but people who could already speak it got together so they could keep speaking it. I think when Albert was growing up and I was growing up too, that was the language our parents or grandparents used so we wouldn't understand what they were talking about. We can understand a little bit of it, but they never encouraged us to speak it, which is a shame because it's a very interesting language.

I: So the generation after you doesn't speak any Yiddish really.

BB: I don't think so.

I: You said language is not important for your identity, but is there something else?

BB: Joining the synagogues. They all have education programs and study groups and things. Culturally and religiously they have everything. In temple a lot of it is in Hebrew, whereas Yiddish is the language people spoke not the Bible language. They definitely do keep their identity, but Yiddish is one of the parts of identity that is let go.

I: Can you tell us a little bit about how you celebrate Jewish festivals and holidays?

BB: Rosh Hashana, which is the Jewish New Year, is in the fall. Our calendar is based on the moon so some years it may be in the beginning of September and in some in the middle of October or anywhere in between. I usually have family over here. Passover which I'm starting to prepare for now is coming up soon. There's a holiday that just passed called Purim and up until this year I've been making the little pastries, but this year I had all the ingredients and just haven't had time to put it together. A lot of the holidays are family oriented.

I: Is Purim the only holiday that's closely associated with food?

BB: Oh God, no. They're all the same. Everything has a food. You name it, there's a food.

AB: And then there's Hanukkah around Christmas time. It really wasn't an important holiday, but because of Christmas it became important.

I: Did that happen during your lifetime? Did you see that switch?

AB: Yeah.

I: When did that switch? In the fifties or sixties?

BB: Probably in the sixties when our kids were growing up, we started hiding everything.

AB: It's a time, during Hanukkah, to give Hanukkah gifts.

I: Did you celebrate it in your families growing up?

BB: We had a menorah growing up but we didn't give presents. Anything I know about cooking or baking I learned from my mother. She used to make the potato latkes. As Albert said, it's a minor holiday, but in the sixties there was all this hype for Christmas and the kids were in school and all the other kids were talking about Christmas and you don't want your kids to feel left out, so we had Hanukkah.

I: What about your children and grandchildren, what do they celebrate?

BB: Well, at school they learn about both, but they do the Jewish stuff.

I: Where do your kids live?

BB: One of them lives in Maynard, one of them in Boxborough, so they're close. I can get to my grandkids in half an hour.

I: Obviously persecution is a big part of Jewish history; have you encountered any form of discrimination growing up in Lowell? Growing up here, what was it like being a Jewish kid going through the school system, etc., etc.?

AB: There was discrimination, I went to the Lincoln School and the kids coming from the Catholic school would sometimes make remarks, throw snowballs at you or something....

I: Were they ethnic slurs?

AB: Yes, racial slurs. There was discrimination.

I: Did you also find that it was held against you professionally once you graduated?

AB: No.

I: Was it pretty common to go through the public school system in the Jewish community? I know the Catholics, for example, set up their own parallel school system?

AB: I went to the public school and I also went to the Hebrew school.

BB: But that was after school for a few hours every day. The full day thing we were talking about before seemed to attract the Orthodox community. The people who ran the school started it when our kids were young and they wanted us to enroll the kids but I just never liked parochial education. I think it segregates the kids too much. They were rather upset that we didn't want to send the kids there. But it is more the more Orthodox Jews that do that.

I: So was it a minority of the Jewish kids that went to the school?

AB: All the kids went to the Jewish school after school regardless of where they went to school.

I: So you both went to public schools and you sent your kids to public schools. What was their experience like?

BB: I don't think they had any discrimination, did they?

AB: No, I don't think so.

BB: They were definitely in the minority, but their friends were from all different ethnic groups. I don't ever remember any problems.

I: Did they enjoy going to the Lowell public schools, I mean as much as anyone can enjoy going to school!

BB: Yeah, I guess so. My older daughter ended up being valedictorian at Lowell High School and the younger one was a Carney Medalist. So I guess they did okay.

I: Where did they go after?

BB: The older one went to BU to study engineering. The younger one went to Brandeis to study psychology and then went to BC for a Masters in Education. She went into teaching. She went from Brandeis to BC.

I: That's quite the culture shock.

BB: Yes, it is!

I: So what did you do after school?

AB: I went to the New England Conservatory for two years to study music and then I went to business school in Lowell. Then I went into the Army for two years, then I went to BU and studied accounting. I worked in an electronics company in Wakefield for six years, Transitron, and then my father died and I took over his store in Lowell.

I: What store was that?

AB: A shoe store, and we're now going out of business.

BB: After forty five years, we've stuck with it all this time.

AB: On Middlesex Street across from the new garage.

I: What was a typical day when you owned the shoe business?

AB: I put in a lot of hours usually from nine thirty to five.

BB: In the early days we were open Monday nights and Thursday nights.

I: Did you work in the store too?

BB: Um-huh.... I've been doing some work with proofreading lately, but once he broke his arm I was back in the store full-time.

I: Did your kids ever work with you in the store?

AB: A little bit, the older daughter did. Not too much, but she came in sometimes.

BB: It's more fun being an engineer.

I: In the Jewish community did a lot of the people own their own businesses?

AB: Yes, a lot of people had their own stores.

I: What kinds of business?

AB: All kinds, shoe stores, clothing stores, gasoline stations I think.

BB: A fabric store.

AB: A lot of people were professionals, doctors, lawyers and accountants.

I: I want to skip back a little bit now. Do you happen to know what generation you are in America?

AB: My grandfather came over from Russia. My mother and father too were born there, but they came as kids

I: Do you know where in Russia they came from?

AB: Yeah, Belarus and the Ukraine, one town is Zaslav and the other is Tuchin.

I: Where there any particular reasons why they left, may-be for economic opportunities or pogroms in Eastern Europe at the time, was it a combination?

AB: Probably for safety, both of them.

I: Did your family ever talk about what was going on there?

AB: No.

BB: What about the story about your father's mother coming and going back?

AB: There was my paternal grandfather, who came and settled in Lowell, and he had a beard and the kids threw stones at him so he had to shave the beard off, and his wife, she already had the children here, my father was one of them, and she was kind of dissatisfied. She was very religious and he had to shave his beard off and work on Saturdays and she missed her mother, so she took my father, a younger brother and an older daughter and they went back to Russia. While she was there she had twins, I guess they were conceived in this country, so she came back with the family. She had left an older son and an older daughter here, so she came back to Lowell.

I: Did they initially plan to come back? Or were they planning to stay forever?

AB: I don't know.

BB: Probably a combination of being dissatisfied and homesick. We try to put ourselves back in that time and it's hard to do. We've checked the Ellis Island website, but the names are all mixed

up a little bit, but we have the records of when they came over the first time and when she came back again with the two other kids. It's interesting to see that.

I: What about your family Barbara?

BB: Well, I know when they came over too. My mother was three at the time and didn't have any recollection of much. I did check on the Ellis Island site and did find out when she came over.

AB: Your father was born in Chelsea.

BB: Yes, and his father was from Russia, and I just met a lady who's going to show me how to use the National Archives. I went to Waltham once where all the records are and I got dizzy looking at the microfilm. But she found some records for me and she's going to help me find out a little bit more. My maiden name was Simmons, but my father would always say, "That's not the way it started out," so I would like to know a little bit about the background.

I: So was that from Russia to Chelsea, England?

BB: No, Chelsea, MA. I never found out where my grandfather was born, but what's interesting is when these people came over they formed these societies with other people who came from the same area and they bought cemetery land, and there's a big complex of cemeteries in Everett, MA and the cemetery that Albert's parents are buried in is in the same section as my mother's family. So they must have been pretty much from the same area in Russia I assume. It's interesting.

I: So these societies were different than communities formed around synagogues then? They were based less on religion and more on geography?

BB: Yeah, and trying to help people, in other words if somebody needed money, they had money set aside and helped them. What was it, the Knights of Zaslav was the one you... I forget, there were so many cemeteries. It was like a fraternal organization not religious. Religion didn't really play a part in any of those organizations. If someone came over from a certain town they knew they could go to these people and at least see a familiar face or see somebody related to somebody.

I: Do these societies still exist?

BB: No, not any more.

I: So you said you studied music, what instrument?

AB: Clarinet and sax.

I: What kind of music do you like to play?

AB: All kinds. I like marches and I used to play with some dance bands, you know, WWII songs. And I was in a marching band.

BB: Every year on Memorial Day we would go. His mother and I would take the two girls and, it was usually a two-day thing because some towns celebrated on the Sunday and some on Monday, so we went to Dracut and Billerica and Lowell, and we spent the whole day dropping him off at the beginning of parades and staying and watching til the end of the parade.

AB: My oldest daughter plays the trombone and she's in a concert band, and they play in Lexington in the summertime and they have concerts every once in a while. And her husband plays the drums; he's in the same band. He plays percussion, he's very good. He gets a lot of jobs in shows around the area. He's also an engineer, and now their son plays the drums and piano.

I: It's a very musical family then.

BB: On his side. Not me, I'm the audience.

I: Do you still play now that your arm isn't broken!

AB: Well, I practice once in a while, but I don't play in a group.

BB: I've tried to convince him to, but he won't do it, because there are a lot of community groups, there's one in Chelmsford...maybe when he retires.

AB: It was part-time, like a hobby. I had that for a while.

I: Now we're going to switch to a new topic, politics! Do you ever feel like the Jewish community has ever been politically involved in Lowell? Been involved with the city council or been involved with city politics?

AB: No, Jewish people don't seem to go to politics in Lowell. They all voted, but most of them either had a business or were professional people. They kept out of politics, I don't know anybody, well, one fellow, Mark Goldman, he likes to go to council meetings, he's always there.

BB: He's been a candidate a few times for city council. Not so much politics, but I got involved. There was a lovely lady that lived in Lowell; she died very suddenly last year. Her husband was an orthodontist and she was another valedictorian from Lowell High School; her name was Rita Mizner and she was involved in a lot of civic things and somehow convinced me to go to. So there was an organization called LFCOE, the Lowell Federation of Civic Organizations on Education, and I came into it after a few of the other Chairmen were Jewish people, mainly when they were looking for a new Superintendent of schools. We were trying to convince them that they should have a wider search, not just hire from within. So, we were quite active and quite involved for a number of years with that. And then the people that were part of that group, we disbanded because there didn't seem to be any other need, so we went on to form the RIF

program, Reading Is Fundamental, and we're on our thirty third year now of raising money and helping the kids in the Lowell schools to read. But again, that's more civic and not political.

I: So there was a strong emphasis on education. Was that important for you as well for your kids?

BB: Oh, sure. Yeah, I've been there from the beginning, but I also used to be an English teacher, so...

I: You said people were professionally active which is why they were not involved with politics, but do you think there were other factors as well?

AB: They didn't think they would ever win. It's mostly Irish people in politics here.

BB: It's hard to break into the old boy network here.

Even though they couldn't break into the council, do you think the Jewish community got their needs met? Was there ever any tension?

AB: No, no tensions.

BB: If you were active in the temple, there were temple politics, and I think if they were going to be involved with anything beyond their business, they would get involved at the temple. I never remember anybody saying they would like to be on the council; they just didn't do it.

I: Were there ever any tensions within the Jewish community, let's say between Reformed, Conservative and Orthodox? The Greeks had two churches that never spoke to one another and currently the Cambodian temple literally split into an upper half and a lower half because of religion and tensions between the religious leadership.

AB: There was no tension, a lot of people belonged to both synagogues, the Orthodox and the Conservative.

BB: I belonged to the Sisterhood of the Orthodox temple when it existed and also the Sisterhood from the Conservative temple, so you got some crossing over, but I don't think they would go from Orthodox to Reformed, it's too far of a jump.

I: Was there any sense that maybe you needed to stick together which might have created the cohesion?

BB: There is a lot of cooperation between the different groups. I think that's more common now. There's a Passover Seder coming up and the Jewish Federation group from Andover reaches out to all the groups. So it's more a question of trying to get all the groups together to make one cohesive group. I definitely see more cooperation than anything.

I: Was that always the way here in Lowell for the Jewish immigrants?

BB: Well, they had the two synagogues, but that had more to do with where they came from, the language. People from Russia and from Lithuania pronounce the same words a little differently, and I think people are more comfortable being with their own group of people. It wasn't so much the religious observance, the services were the same.

AB: I've been to the two synagogues on Howard Street and the two up in the Highlands; I think most people have.

I: So what has been your involvement with the National Park? I know you helped set up the exhibit with Mehmed Ali. Did the Jewish community also get involved?

BB: There was also an exhibit... do you know Mark Levine and Shirley Kolack. They did an exhibit for the Park and I was involved with that. Shirley spoke to me when she was writing the book and there were a couple of inconsistencies, but we're quoted in a couple pages in the book. And I was very involved with the Folk Festival. At that point there were more people willing to volunteer, so we formed the Jewish Community Council and that was made up of the representatives from the different temples. It was just an umbrella group; it had its own entity and every year when we were planning the Folk Festival, we would go and be part of it. Even before the national festival came, there were others. Each individual group had their own festivals rather than one big festival; the Jewish people had theirs one week, and then next week the Greek people, etc. Sometimes it was at Lucy Larcom, it was at different places, but once they had the big festival, the Jewish community participated for many years and I used to demonstrate how to make cheese blintzes as part of the Foodways. So I guess I've been involved with the Park.

I: Did you go to any of the other exhibits or take the boat tour?

BB: Well, our daughter worked as a ranger when she was in high school... and we went on a couple of things that she led. We should do more. Once we retire, we'll have time. Well, to wrap up, are there any questions that we missed and you feel we should or could have asked in the interview?

AB: I can tell you about something. There was this Jewish lawyer, I can't think of his name, but he was the lawyer for the Lowell Sun also. Frank Goldman! He was the President of the Zionist organization which is a national organization, and he had something to do with getting Israel recognized. He was an important person in the city, Frank Goldman.

I: Should we have asked more about Jewish immigrants and the formation of Israel do you think?

AB: Well, after WWII a couple of cousins of my father survived, they were in the Russian army in WWII... and they went to Israel and somehow found my father's family here. My mother used to write letters to them since she could write in Yiddish, and we'd send them money and food and clothing and different things. So I guess they passed away, but they had maybe children that are still there.

I: Have you been able to go to Israel?

BB: No. He has a cousin who went and met these cousins probably about twenty years ago. Would you like to go?

BB: More than anything, I don't like flying! We're not travelers and to me the idea of going that far...

I: How about you?

AB: I would like to go there, but I like to stay home.

I: Thank you both very much.